IT WAS NOT HIERBABUENA

BY ALBA PRATALIA

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Nathan's phone buzzed with one of those algorithmically optimized bits of "relatable content." The title read: *Hangovers in your 20s vs. Hangovers in your 30s.*
He sighed, half out of habit, half because he already knew exactly what was coming.

The video played: a young guy in his twenties — trim, bright-eyed, the kind of person who owns protein powder — wakes up in spotless sunlight, stretches, drinks a green smoothie, jogs up a hill, and somehow looks spiritually fulfilled about it. Then, *cut*: the "30s version" of the same guy, now a human ruin, sprawled in a dark room, moaning for water, ibuprofen,

or death by firing squad. The punchline was obvious, and yet the internet insisted it was revolutionary. As if turning thirty were the biological equivalent of being shot in the knee by time.

Nathan laughed. And laughed. And laughed. He laughed so long he startled the cat, who gave him the look reserved for the dangerously deranged. Because here's the thing: in his twenties, after a night of tequila shots, he didn't bounce up and go hiking either. He woke up in a battlefield — the air thick with the stench of cheap limes, a pool of sick glistening by the bed, and the faint hum of self-loathing in D minor. His liver was a war veteran before he even turned twenty-five.

But now, in his forties? No problem. After decades of steady conditioning — years of

dedicated drink training — his system had evolved. What used to be poison was now performance fuel. He didn't get hangovers; he got *momentum.*

He turned off the video, smirking, and shuffled toward the kitchen. The clock read 7:56 a.m. A sensible hour for a mojito. Maybe even a touch late, depending on what sort of Tuesday you wanted it to be. He smashed lime and hierbabuena with the precision of a surgeon, poured rum like confession, and stirred. The ice clinked, soda fizzed. Civilization in sound form.

He raised the glass to the light, admired it. "Hair of the dog," he muttered. "Though at this point, it's more like the whole damn pelt." He took a long sip. A wave of clarity spread through him — the specific kind that only rum

can provide: the temporary illusion that you've got life figured out, followed immediately by the knowledge that you don't care if you haven't.

He glanced back at the phone, the frozen frame of that bedridden thirty-something still on screen, clutching his temples like a saint of self-pity. Nathan saluted him with the glass. "To the fallen," he said. "May your electrolytes rest in peace."

Outside, the street was waking up — people in suits clutching coffee cups, jogging types pretending to enjoy existence, delivery scooters zipping through puddles. Nathan watched it all with the calm superiority of someone who had already beaten the system. He didn't do detox. He didn't do juice cleanses. His soul had already been through the rinse cycle long ago.

He took another sip, exhaled.
"You amateurs," he said softly. "You think hangovers are about age. They're about *technique.*"

He checked the time again: 8:02 a.m.
Plenty of day left to ruin beautifully.

He leaned on the counter, glass half full, mind drifting.
Somewhere, he thought, there's probably another version of that video — hangovers in your 40s — showing some sad sack crawling to the bathroom on all fours. He smiled. That wasn't him. Not yet. His 40s were just his 20s, with better taste in gin and less tolerance for people who say "detox."

He downed the rest, rinsed the glass, and started making a second one. It wasn't indulgence. It was *maintenance.*

By the time the clock hit 8:07, he was laughing again — loud, tonic-bright laughter that rang through the kitchen like a man toasting his own invincibility.

“Hangover?” he said to no one in particular. “No,” he said, smiling. “Tuesday.”

Nathan was driving, of course — because revelations only strike when you’re alone in a car halfway between civilization and a gas station that sells both condoms and canned peaches. The radio, as if divinely orchestrated by the ghost of bad taste, started playing *Green, Green Grass of Home.*

“Yes, they’ll all come to meet me,” the singer crooned, syrupy and tender, “arms reaching, smiling sweetly…”

Nathan nodded along, as one does when nostalgia sneaks up disguised as melody. Then

he froze mid-sip of coffee (lukewarm, tragic). Wait a damn minute.

Everyone always said it was a song about mortality — a man facing the end, picturing his hometown, that whole *memento mori with banjos* angle. Sure, sure. Very poetic. But Nathan, several decades and thousands of drinks into life, had the trained ear of someone who's heard too many lies wrapped in major chords.

Arms reaching. Smiling sweetly. Green grass. Sweet Mary, hair of gold and lips like cherries. Come on. COME ON.

He slapped the steering wheel. "You're telling me this isn't code?" he said to the empty car. "This isn't one long, country-fried euphemism for a joint and a good trip?"

Because listen — “Sweet Mary,” “green grass,” “gentle people smiling.” How different is that from:

If you’re going to San Francisco,
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair,
You’re gonna meet some gentle people there…

It’s the same damn crowd! Only difference is geography — one’s on parole, the other’s barefoot in Haight-Ashbury.

Nathan could picture it now: the “man facing his mortality” just sitting in a haze, baked out of his mind, thinking he’s back home because the living room wallpaper is pulsating. “Ah yes,” he murmurs, “the green, green grass of home.” Buddy, that’s your carpet.

He turned up the radio, grinning like a madman. The earnest country voice went on, swelling with pathos, but all Nathan could hear

was the sound of a late-60s smoke circle disguised as an elegy.

"Sure, pal," he said. "You're dying. And that's *definitely* not a metaphor for your stash running out."

He laughed out loud, the kind of laugh that makes passing drivers look over and reconsider calling the authorities. The laughter of a man who's cracked the code no one asked him to crack.

By the time the song reached its final *"green, green grass of home,"* Nathan was conducting an invisible orchestra, still ranting to the windshield:

"Tell me I'm wrong! Go ahead! The only difference between country and hippie music is whether the guitar player owns shoes!"

The radio faded into static as he pulled over to light a cigarette.
He exhaled, watching the smoke curl up like a sarcastic halo.

“Green grass,” he said softly. “Yeah, sure, Tom. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Nathan stared at the empty glass, ice melting like dignity after 2 a.m. “Boy, I miss weed,” he said out loud, like a confession to the fridge. “Fuck, I can’t smoke anymore.”

He paused, thought about it. “Or can I?” The fridge said nothing. Typical fridge — always judgmental, never helpful.

He sat back, tapping the counter. “Who even sells it now? Back in the day, you’d just go to some guy named Diego with dreadlocks and one sandal. Now it’s all QR codes and brand names like *ZenGanja™ Microdose Drops.* You need a login just to feel illegal.”

He pictured himself wandering around a college campus in his forties, trench coat flapping, asking whisperingly, “Hey, kids, know where I could score a gram?” Yeah. That’d go well. Ten minutes later he’d be on TikTok as *#BoomerCopSeeks420* with jazz flute in the background.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Why can’t I have a nephew who delivers the stuff like Uber Eats? Uber Weeds. There’s a business model! You pick the strain, they bring it in a paper bag with a free cookie. Five-star rating system. ‘Prompt, discreet, and didn’t judge my pajamas.’”

He grinned, starting to enjoy his own delirium. “They could even gamify it. Collect points, earn badges: *Couch Philosopher*, *Munchie Level 10*, *Survived a Paranoia Loop*...”

He laughed, then blinked at his drink. “Wait. Hold up.” He leaned close. “That was not *hierbabuena* in that last mojito, was it?”

He sniffed the glass suspiciously. “Moo-jito,” he said, pronouncing it like an alien. “Is that Spanish for cow drink? Because I’m seeing sounds right now.”

He shuffled to the mirror, pointed at his reflection. “Congratulations, genius. You’ve invented the bovine cocktail. Fresh milk, mint, and mild regret.”

He sat down, the world pleasantly uneven. “Uber Weeds,” he whispered again, tasting the words like poetry. “Delivery guaranteed in thirty minutes or you start seeing cows.”

The trumpet blared like a cosmic alarm clock: **“You must take the A-Train!”**

Nathan, trench coat dripping, fedora tilted at a rakish 37° , stood beneath the awning of the Harlem station entrance. The rain came down like jazz — improvisational, relentless, slightly

drunk. Steam hissed from a manhole like the city exhaling its sins.

“ALL ABOOOOARD!” came the voice again, somewhere between divine and deranged.

Nathan checked his watch — it was, as always, both too late and too early. A flash of lightning illuminated the wet platform like a spotlight on a guilty conscience.

“ALL ABOOOOARD!”

He turned — and there was Sam. Trench coat too, cigarette half-lit, face carved out of melancholy. Sam didn’t speak; he handed over an envelope, damp and trembling like a secret that wanted to stay buried.

Nathan tore it open. The rain smeared the ink, but the words were clear enough to hurt:

Nathan,
I cannot go with you or ever see you again.

You must not ask why.
Signed,
Every girl ever in Nathan's life.

The trumpet wailed again, this time mockingly, like the soundtrack to bad luck.

Nathan looked toward the departing train. Steam. Shadows. Destiny with cheap upholstery. He hesitated only long enough for the universe to sigh. Then he leapt on board, just as the doors clanged shut with cinematic timing.

The carriage rocked, the city blurred. The jazz got louder — brass and heartbreak mixing with the scent of gin and regret. Nathan adjusted his hat, stared out into the black tunnel, and muttered, "Figures. Even imaginary women coordinate their exits."

Outside the window, reality stretched, twisted, melted. Harlem flickered into the tropics, the

subway rails curving into palm trees. The announcer's voice went smooth and velvety: **"Next stop… Sugar Hill… and enlightenment, baby…"**

Nathan blinked. The passengers had turned into saxophones. The ceiling was breathing. The conductor was wearing a cowbell.

"Oh, no," Nathan whispered. "That was *definitely not hierbabuena* I crushed in that mojito."

The lights dimmed to a soft neon green. A bassline walked up the aisle like a living thing. Nathan leaned back, buttoned his trench coat, and grinned to nobody:

"Well… at least it's express."

Nathan — **Nathan** — the man who could make a doorbell reconsider its career, the man whose humming once made a pigeon abandon its nest mid-build, the man who sang so off-key that

music teachers spontaneously developed migraines — *that* Nathan was now sitting on a barstool with an acoustic guitar, playing the blues like he'd traded souls at a Mississippi crossroads.

And he was *good.*
Worryingly good.
Suspiciously good.
"Somebody check the mojito," the bartender whispered. "He's possessed."

Nathan's fingers slid along the frets with the ease of a man who'd definitely never done that before. His voice, normally comparable to a smoke alarm dying, came out deep — gravelly — wounded — *sexy,* even, God forgive us all.

He played:

Once I lived the life of a Saturday night
Laugh-so-loud glitter, neon-bright
Took all my friends out for reckless delight
We danced through sunrise, hearts feeling light

The bar went quiet. Even the ice cubes listened.

Then the grey came crawling slow
Lost all my spark, had nowhere to go
If I get my hands on a good day again
I'll grip it tight like a saint on sin

Someone at the counter sniffled. A grown man. A biker.

'Cause nobody knows you
When you're sinking down
In your chest, not one spark's burning
And all those "friends" ain't sticking around

Nathan strummed. Thunder rolled somewhere far away. Or maybe that was just the dishwasher.

But when you climb back into the sunny din
Everybody wants to be your soulmate again
Funny how it turns, I've no doubt
Nobody knows you when you're down and out

He tapped the guitar body like he'd always known it.
The universe pretended this was normal.

Oh, nobody knows you
When the joy runs dry
In your laughter, not one echo
And every hand waves goodbye

A woman swooned. Nathan did not notice.

But when your smile drags itself back in
They all swear they've known you since way back when
Strange little circus, without a doubt
Nobody knows you — nobody knows you —
Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

He let the final chord hang in the air.
The room stared at him like he'd sprouted angel wings and a backstage pass to Delta heaven.

Nathan blinked, looked at his hands, and said, "...Okay. That's illegal. I should not be able to do that."

Then he remembered.
The mojito.
The mint.
The *"mint."*

He narrowed his eyes at his empty glass.

"It was not — NOT — hierbabuena in that mojito…" he whispered.

Somewhere in the distance, a cow mooed, a guitar twanged, and reality quietly backed out of the room to let whatever was happening… keep happening.

Nathan, drunk on delta-blues talent he did **not** legally possess, reached into his trenchcoat like a man about to reveal state secrets. Instead, he pulled out… a photo. A *printed* one. A relic. A fossil.

A slightly creased, sun-faded picture of a fictional character who definitely—**DEFINITELY**—was not Shaye Cohn from Tuba Skinny. Truly. Absolutely not her. Merely a woman who, by cosmic coincidence, had:

- the same face
- the same aura
- the same aesthetic
- the same ability to weaponize a cornet

But it was **not** her. No sir. Entirely different. Totally fictional. Lawyers, please stand down.

Nathan held the photo the way a WWI infantryman clutches the picture of his sweetheart before charging into machine-gun

fire. Tenderly. Reverently. Slightly trembling, but that may have been the mojito-mint-which-wasn't-mint.

He positioned the photo on the bar as if it deserved a seat.
Then, in full blues-possession mode, he sang directly to it.

And the blues went filthy.
Unapologetically.
Like a gospel choir raised in a brothel.

Nathan crooned:

You are my sunshine
My only sunshine
You make me hard-on
When times are gray
You'll never know, dear
How much I wank on you
Please don't take
My hard-on away

The bartender dropped a glass.
A man in the corner crossed himself.
The neon sign flickered as if morally conflicted.

Nathan kept going, gentle as sin:

The other night, dear
As I lay sleeping
I wet-dreamed I held you
In my arms
When I awoke, dear
I was all sticky
So I laid down my head and smiled

He held the final note like a saint holding a cigarette.

The whole bar stared in dumb awe, trying to decide whether to clap, laugh, or call an exorcist.

Nathan kissed the corner of the photo, whispered,

“Not Shaye Cohn. Just saying. Entirely fictional.”

Then he tucked it back into his pocket like a man sheathing a holy relic.

And somewhere in his skull, the mojito-cow-mint hallucination mooed approvingly.

Nathan had always had a soft spot for natural disasters — not the tragic kind on the news with violin music and donation numbers. No, no. Nathan liked *local* chaos. *Personal* chaos. The kind that ruined commutes, not lives. The kind of destruction you could watch from your window with a coffee, murmuring, “Yes… destroy the sidewalk, queen.”

Floods? Glorious.

Monsoons? Sensual.

Hurricanes? *Chef's kiss*, provided they strictly limited themselves to rearranging garden furniture and humiliating SUVs.

Nathan didn't want victims — that would be like adding anchovies to custard: disgusting, unnecessary, and morally suspicious. What he adored was the **world being rearranged like a toddler got hold of it**. Harmless destruction. Structural mischief. Geotechnical mayhem.

He loved things people considered untouchable getting absolutely bodied by nature:

- retaining walls crumbling like stale biscotti
- pavements buckling like they've had one bad Monday too many
- roads splitting open like they saw something shocking

- entire hillsides doing a dramatic slide-and-glide routine
- debris flows swaggering down ravines like a drunk uncle at a wedding

He'd stand there, watching mud and rocks tumble, thinking,

"Yeeeees, ruin the drainage system! TAKE IT DOWN!"

It wasn't evil. It was aesthetic.

Nature, doing what Nathan wished he could do to bureaucracy.

Every landslide was a personality test.

Every sinkhole was a love letter.

Every flash flood was nature whispering, "Surprise, bitch."

Nathan didn't want danger. He didn't want tragedy. He wanted **pure disruption** — the great cosmic Etch A Sketch shake. Everything upside down, sideways, rearranged··· and nobody hurt, except the structural engineers who have to explain it later.

And in that moment, staring at the mudflow licking at the edge of a ruined bike lane, Nathan felt perfectly at peace.

Nothing like a bit of property damage to soothe the soul.

Nathan stood on the pier, staring at the most aggressively peaceful scene imaginable: bright afternoon sun, sea so calm you could butter toast on it, sky an unblemished blue like a freshly Photoshopped postcard. Seagulls drifted lazily overhead, not even screaming

insults the way seagulls morally should. The world was offensively serene.

And Nathan… was fine.

Suspiciously fine.

No collapsing seawalls, no rogue waves eating a surf shack, no mudslide casually deleting a hillside suburb, no drainage system committing seppuku. Just… calm. Stillness. The kind of day Instagram influencers sacrifice goats to achieve.

Yet Nathan wasn't clawing at his own skin from boredom. He wasn't yearning for a landslide to spice things up. He wasn't scanning the horizon for a cyclone like a Victorian widow waiting for her shipwrecked lover.

He was… *content.*

Which was alarming.

He leaned on the railing, squinting at the peaceful ocean as if it had personally betrayed him. “Why am I okay with this?” he muttered. “Where’s the chaos? Where’s the aesthetic collapse? Where’s the infrastructure on life support?”

A gentle breeze brushed his face.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at it. “Don’t you dare soothe me.”

Yet he remained soothed.

The gulls flew in perfect formation, graceful as ballet dancers. “Stop that,” he whispered. “Be disgusting. Fight over half a sandwich. Commit war crimes.”

But no. They looked like they were filming a shampoo commercial.

Nathan exhaled. A long, slow, unsettlingly peaceful exhale.

“Nope,” he said. “No way. Something’s off.”

He sniffed the air.

Paused.

Looked at his fingers.

Looked at the ocean.

Looked at the past hour of unearned serenity.

And then it hit him.

“That was not — NOT — hierbabuena.”

The mojito mint.

The *non-mint.*

The illicit botanical surprise.

He stared back at the ocean as if it suddenly made perfect sense.

"Great," he muttered. "Now I'm high enough to enjoy a postcard."

A single *click*—and suddenly the universe decided Nathan needed drama.

A **spotlight** exploded onto him from nowhere, carving him out of reality like God hit "theatrical mode." The peaceful ocean vanished. The gulls vanished. The pier vanished. Nathan stood center-stage on some cosmic nightclub platform, wrapped in a sleek black **tuxedo** that fit him far too well for a man who usually dressed like a disgruntled librarian.

The orchestra swelled behind him. Muted trumpets. Velvet strings. A brushed snare whispering secrets. Nathan blinked once, twice—

Then channeled a drunk Tony Bennett, Sinatra with three martinis, and the ghost of "late-night PBS fundraiser crooner" all at once.

He stared straight ahead, addressing not the audience (there wasn't one), but his **mind**—his sophisticated lady turned broken jukebox of gloom. And he belted it. *Belting,* like gin-soaked Broadway:

They say, in your early days, joy came strolling in,

And in your circuits there burned a grin—

A grin that shimmered one day… then dimmed within.

He gestured to the empty room like he was negotiating with fate's maître d'.

Then with disillusion etched in your tone,

You learned that cheerful thoughts break their own bones.

The years rewired you somehow…

I hear you now:

His voice dropped to that smoky nightclub growl.

Brooding, sinking, never thinking of tomorrow, nonchalant,

Doomscrolls glowing, mind just going through the motions, numb and gaunt—

Tell me, cortex, is that all you want?

The orchestra gave him a sultry, tragic swell.

Nathan leaned into it like he'd always been waiting for this exact nervous breakdown.

No sophisticated mind I know,

You miss the highs you lost long ago,

And when no one's inside—you sigh.

A glissando of piano.

A spotlight tighter.

Nathan in profile like a tragic saint of neurology.

Brooding, sinking, never thinking of tomorrow, nonchalant,

Darkness humming, feelings numbing like a low-grade restaurant haunt—

Sweet lobes, is that all you want?

He raised one hand.

Classic crooner gesture.

Part plea, part accusation, part pure theatre.

No sophisticated mind I know,

You miss the spark you lost long ago,

And when nobody is nigh…

The band held the note.

Horns ready.

Strings trembling.

Nathan whispered the last line like a confession:

You cry.

Silence.

The spotlight flickered.

A single seagull squawked somewhere in the void, confused.

Nathan adjusted his tuxedo bowtie with shaky dignity.

"Yep," he muttered. "I *knew* that was not hierbabuena."

Nathan slid right back into bluesman mode like it was muscle memory he never earned. One blink he's Tony Bennett's drunk cousin, next

blink he's sitting on a wooden stool with an acoustic guitar and a face carved out of melancholy. The tuxedo stayed—because why the hell not—nothing says "authentic blues suffering" like formalwear you can't afford.

He angled the guitar on his knee.
Gave it that pointless little tuning twist people do when they want to look deep.
Blew out a long sigh that smelled like gin, regret, and whatever that mojito herb really was.

Then he sank straight into that Clapton-bluest-of-blues timbre—soft, smoked, resigned.

He played your piece like a man confessing to a void he was genuinely dating:

Bell-bottom void, you made me cry,
I wasn't born yet but I swear I tried—

If I could choose a place to lie,
It'd be right back in your no-time arms.

Nathan nodded as he sang—like the void had personally wronged him in 1972.

Do you wanna watch me slide
Off this floor of being alive?
Do you wanna hear me whisper, "Let me back"?
I'd gladly do it, 'cause—

His thumb picked the bass string slow, pulsing like a tired heartbeat.

I don't wanna stay awake,
Give me one more fade, please.
I don't wanna stay a shape,
In your nothing I wanna sink.

Someone in the cosmic audience wiped a tear that wasn't theirs.

It's all wrong, but it's alright,
Existing's overrated, baby.
Once I was strong, then I turned to light—
You won't find a better vanisher.

Nathan gave the guitar a little sad-boy wobble. Pure technique founded on absolutely no technique.

Do you wanna watch me slide
Off this floor of being alive?
Do you wanna hear me whisper, "Let me back"?
I'd gladly do it, 'cause—

The blues bent around him like warm fog.

I don't wanna stay awake,
Give me one more fade, please.
I don't wanna stay a shape,
In your nothing I wanna sink.

He closed his eyes, leaned in.

Bell-bottom void, don't say goodbye,
We're surely gonna meet again—
And when we do, don't act surprised
If I show up as absolutely nothing, friend.

One last slow riff—sweet, low, disappearing into itself.

Do you wanna watch me slide
Off this floor of being alive?
Do you wanna hear me whisper, "Let me back"?
I'd gladly do it, 'cause—

He let the final chorus barely breathe:

I don't wanna stay awake,
Give me one more fade, please.
I don't wanna stay a shape,
In your nothing I wanna sink.

The spotlight dimmed.
The tuxedo shimmered.
Nathan exhaled like a man who just signed a peace treaty with oblivion.

“There you go,” he murmured.
“A blues for the guy who stared into the abyss and said, ‘Baby, take me back—no forwarding address.’”

athan stared into the middle distance with that cosmic-philosopher look that only appears after questionable cocktails and even more questionable herbs.

“Indeed,” he thought, “better to never have been.”

Very dramatic. Very Greek tragedy, if Greek tragedies had mojitos.

He raised the empty glass like a priest lifting a relic.

“Hierbabuena, oh hierbabuena, thou who hierbabuena are not… finish your job. Send me back to nothingness. Make me whole with void.”

The wind whispered.

The ocean held its breath.

The spotlight dimmed to “existential monologue mode.”

And Nathan, gently, **ceased to exist**.

Not in the tragic, headline-making, police-report kind of way.
No drama. No ambulance. No cosmic judgment.

He simply… blinked out.
Poof.
Like a badly coded NPC despawned by the universe.

One moment he was there, tuxedo slightly crooked, guitar still humming some leftover blues vibration…
and the next, he was gone.

No pain.
No revelation.
No celestial paperwork.

Just: *click* — process terminated.

The world didn't gasp.
The seagulls didn't salute.
The ocean didn't write poetry about him.

Reality merely shrugged, closed the tab, and freed up the RAM.

Nathan dissolved into pure, peaceful nothingness.
A warm, silent, unbothered void.
The kind he'd been flirting with all afternoon.

And the last echo of him — not his body, not his voice, just the idea of him — drifted off whispering:

"…told you that wasn't hierbabuena…"